

Port Chicago Naval Magazine

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Memorial
California



Driven by wartime demands, loaders worked around the clock. Yard engines pushed rail cars full of munitions onto the 1,200-foot pier (right).

Loader teams at each of the ship's holds used muscle and steam winches (above) to wrestle bombs, shells, and mines from the cars into the holds.

ALL PHOTOS: U.S. NAVY

I found myself flying towards the wall . . .

Cyril Sheppard was reliving the first explosion. Then the next one came right behind that. Phoom! . . . Men were screaming, the lights went out and glass was flying all over the place. For Sheppard and other seamen a mile away from the munitions loading pier, the monstrous blast was traumatic enough. Loaders and others at the pier that night—320 men—lost their lives. The 1944 Port Chicago explosion was the result of unsafe loading practices. When some loaders refused to return to work under the same conditions, the U.S. Navy put them on trial for mutiny. All the munitions loaders at the base were African American, making the explosion and trial a little-known but important chapter in the history of U.S. civil rights.

THE WORK With war threatening in the Pacific, the U.S. Navy needed to boost its West Coast capacity for storing and loading munitions. Port Chicago on Suisun Bay offered a deepwater terminal, rail connections, and isolation from highly populated areas. The December 1941 Pearl Harbor attack spurred on construction, and the facility was ready to load ships a year later.

The seamen assigned as loaders were all African American, a reflection of naval policies at the time. The Navy had recently allowed African Americans to train in duties outside their traditional roles as stewards, stevedores, or cooks, but even in time of war most were assigned to these menial jobs in segregated units. At Port Chicago the black munitions loaders were supervised by white officers and black petty officers.

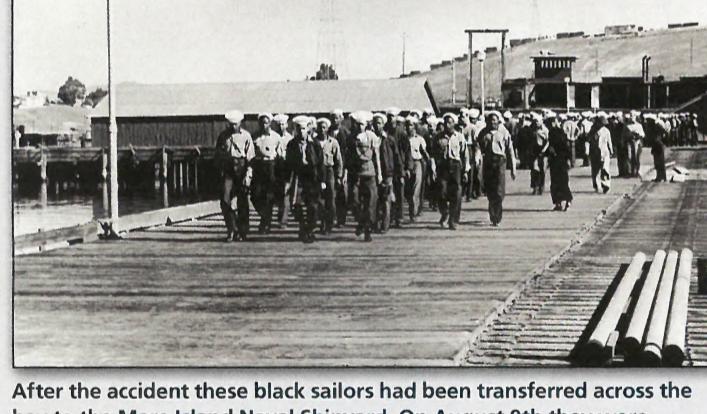
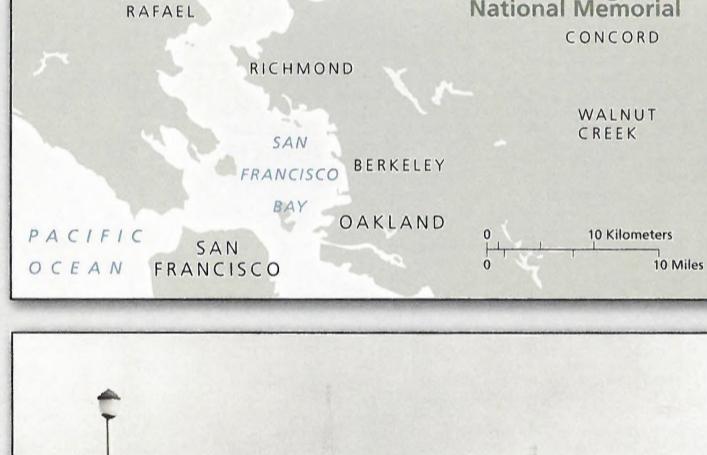
Already chafing under segregation, the seamen grew increasingly apprehensive about the nature of the work. Neither they nor the officers had special training in handling munitions. Worse, officers placed bets on whose team could load the most tonnage. The facility also ignored advice from a local longshoremen's union and the U.S. Coast Guard regarding safer loading practices.

THE EXPLOSION By July 1944 Port Chicago had widened its pier so two ships could be loaded. On the night of the 17th the E.A. Bryan was almost full. The Quinault Victory had arrived that day; loading would start at midnight. Sixteen rail cars lined the pier, filled with 1,000-pound bombs, depth charges, and sensitive incendiary bombs. Also at the pier were a marine guard; ships' crews; a few civilians, including the rail crew; and a Coast Guard fire boat crew.

No one is sure what happened next—only that at 10:18 pm there was a tremendous explosion, followed seconds later by a much larger one that obliterated ships, pier, cars, and humans. The blast's debris-filled cloud rose 12,000 feet into the air. Its shock wave was felt for 40 miles, and falling debris damaged most of the homes and businesses of the town of Port Chicago, over a mile away. The base's injured were taken to nearby hospitals, while other survivors were left with the grim work of recovering their crewmates' remains.

THE "MUTINY" Survivors anticipated 30 days leave—as their officers had received—and transfer to other duty, but the Navy granted neither. Instead they were sent to Mare Island Naval Shipyard and on August 9 were marched to the shipyard's munitions pier to resume loading. Initially 258 refused, saying they were afraid to load. Threatened with death by firing squad for mutiny during war, 208 yielded. They were given bad conduct discharges after serving out their terms. The 50 who persisted faced the largest mass mutiny trial in naval history.

The prosecutor's case turned on what he called "collective" acts to subvert established authority. The defense argued that while the 50 had refused to load, this was the result of each man's fear and not a conspiracy to overthrow a superior. NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall publicly asked hard questions about the base's safety practices, but the 50 were convicted and given sentences of 8 to 15 years. After the war the Navy granted clemency to the 50 and put them on ships to finish out their enlistments. Though their convictions were not overturned, their acts of civil disobedience brought to light the injustice of racial segregation in the military.



After the accident these black sailors had been transferred across the bay to the Mare Island Naval Shipyard. On August 9th they were marched toward the USS San Gay to again load munitions.

OFFICIAL PHOTOGRAPH
NOT TO BE RELEASED
FOR PUBLICATION

NAVY YARD MARE ISLAND, CALIF



The blast reduced part of the pier to rubble; the rest disappeared. The stern section of Quinault Victory (upper right) was thrown 500 feet.

Remembering the Fallen

The 320 men who died in the Port Chicago explosion represented a cross-section of the base's workforce: 202 African American enlisted personnel working as loaders that night (15 percent of all African American deaths in World War II); nine of their officers; 64 members of the U.S. Maritime Service (crewmen on *E.A. Bryan* and *Quinault Victory*); 33 members of the U.S. Navy Armed Guard (military personnel assigned to cargo ships in wartime); three civilian Navy workers and three civilian contractors; five U.S. Coast Guard fire boat crewmen, and the Marine on guard duty that night.

Their deaths called attention to safety problems at munitions facilities. The Navy began addressing the issues of both safety and segregation in the months following the tragedy.

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* Identified Dead

About Your Visit

The memorial is located on an active military base. Tours are by reservation; allow two weeks for your request to be processed. See park website for information on ID required for base access and firearms regulations. Service animals are welcome.

Tours are available Tuesday through Saturday at 10 am and 1:30 pm (allow 1½ hours for the tour). There is no public access on Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. The base may also be closed to the public due to military operations.

More Information

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www.nps.gov/poch

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Sea Scouts learn about the World War II disaster. Pilings from the pier destroyed in the explosion extend into Suisun Bay.

ALL PHOTOS: NPS